The History of The Sonic Ideal

If you're someone interested in reading a Sonic the Hedgehog fan comic, you're in luck. The web's teeming with them. Every other week, someone comes up with a great new idea for a Sonic comic, and immediately sets to work, gathering together all their favourite pens and pencils, and letting their imagination take them on a ride through the life of Sonic the Hedgehog.

It's a lot of fun, and it's a great way to practise drawing comics. But we aren't interested in doing it that way.

Almost all the Sonic fan comics produced on the Internet today share a common factor: they are all in competition to be the most unique. Ironic as that may seem, it is inevitable, because anyone producing a comic exactly the same as another is not going to spark anyone's interest. So to be the most original, the creators think up a new twist to the story, which their comic will explore. Maybe Sonic has a brother and his adventures ought to be told. Maybe Sonic has a new best friend whose powers exceed his own, and *his* adventures need to be told. Or, maybe, the whole world is different to usual, and we get to see how Sonic lives there, who his friends are, and who he is fighting against.

Again, all a lot of fun, and great to read. But, we aren't interested in doing things *that* way either.

We were once, though. The whole idea was born a long time ago when Abigail Ryder and I were talking on the phone. We were fifteen, and had been best friends for a little while, having first become aware of one another on the day Abby joined the Sonic Usenet newsgroup to find we shared an interest in Egmont Fleetway's *Sonic The Comic*. Abby suggested that, since I was interested in writing Sonic fan fiction and she was interested in drawing the characters, we ought to work together to produce a graphic novel based on the original *Sonic the Hedgehog* game for the Sega Megadrive system. It sounded like a great idea, so I began to sketch out some notes to work from.

By this time, though, I had been an active member of the Sonic online community for a while, and had come across a couple of young writers, the Cataquet sisters, who had been working on something called *The Mobius Chronicles*. Their idea was to produce a series of novel-length fan fictions which explained the histories of the planet *Mobius*, the world in which Sonic is said to live in most Western versions of the story, in this case the *Sonic the Hedgehog* comic line published by Archie Comics. The first few stories told of the planet's ancient past, eventually reaching the point when Sonic's adventures became important, at which point those stories would be covered as well, but with a few extra twists. I had asked the sisters whether it would be okay to take their notes and write my own versions of the same stories, but set in the world of the Fleetway comic instead of its American counterpart, and they had agreed.

Remembering this idea, I suggested to Abby that instead of only adapting the original Sonic game, we should try for *all* of them, and the earlier stories adapted from the *Mobius Chronicles* as well. She was very excited about the idea, and so without much hesitation I set to work.

The official birthplace and spiritual home of *The Sonic Ideal* is a small, picturesque English fishing town called Whitby, where I sat on a bench at the foot of the famous hundred and ninety-nine steps, with a reporter's notebook on my lap, writing the initial notes for the first book in the series: *Legend of Mobius*. The story was about an ancient spirit born of the nuclear fallout created during the Great War which wiped out mankind, thousands of years ago, called J'Tunn, and the good spirit which surrounded the globe and fought against it, called Mobius. Mobius would, over the course of the series, be controlled via the Chaos Emeralds by a series of characters of our own invention, whose lives and adventures played important parts in the shaping of Mobius' life. All the time the spirit of J'Tunn, having escaped its original, dragon-like body, would leap from body to body, eventually reaching the lone human survivor of the Great War, Doctor Robotnik.

After the first graphic novel was scripted and Abby had begun the artwork, notably drawing a page which showed a class of ancient Echidna teenagers in the middle of their studies which stands out as a pretty decent page even now, something very important happened.

Dawn Best, an established Sonic fan artist and role-player, began a project which she called *The Sega Sonic Ideal*. The aim was to create a new world for Sonic, by taking the best parts of the established continuities in Japan, and using them as a basis to add on to. It was a simple enough idea, and she carried it out with style. She invented a world half drawn from the Sonic Team's console games, and half based on the Japanese OVA series *Sonic the Hedgehog*, comprising of two half-hour animated shorts which later became *Sonic the Hedgehog: The Movie* in the English-speaking world. From there she placed a handful of fan-made characters, mostly taken from her role-playing experiences and created by her online friends, within this new world, and started to produce a comic about it.

When I visited her site, only two pages of the comic had been completed, but I was immediately inspired. The story was about Princess Sally, a character from Archie Comics' series altered to fit the style of the games, who had been trapped under a falling tree. Sonic then rescued her, but she was shortly afterwards kidnapped by Nack, a bounty hunter Weasel. The story was standard fare for a fan comic, but what got me interested was the character profiles section. She had written short descriptions of the personality of each character, and they really made me think. I realised then, possibly for the first time, that the characters from the Sonic games acted very differently to the ones in the various comics and cartoons. The profiles, however brief, filled my mind with ideas for stories, and so I quickly wrote to her, telling her my ideas, and requesting to be put on the writing staff for the comic.

Dawn was happy to welcome me on board, and so I began working on some scripts. One of the first things I noticed was the amount of new characters which had been added to the cast list. I made it my priority to introduce them in ways which added to the plot, so that they didn't simply flood the series and hide the real characters. For days I bombarded Dawn's mailbox with my plot ideas for the series, and before long she made the realisation that I was probably more enthusiastic about the project, or rather, less interested in my schoolwork, than she was. She wanted the project to live on, and with her schedule she decided the way to ensure that was to hand the whole thing over to me.

I was definitely very serious about continuing The Sonic Ideal. As soon as I had heard that Dawn was leaving the project to me, I called Abby, and we talked about what to do. This was a very big opportunity, and we realised that if we put everything we had into the series, it would really be a great way of giving something back to the Sonic online community.

The first step we took was to abandon the original *Sega Sonic Ideal* website. By letting go of what we had already, we were left with the ability to design a new, fresher Sonic Ideal. We gathered together my script and plot ideas, along with the stories for the *Mobius* series, and tried to decide which of it to keep, and which of it to scrap.

One of the first things we realised was that, through all this, we had remained oblivious to the one factor which would make our comic stand above others. We had tried to invent the longest, most original storyline we could, spanning thousands of years, explaining the creation of the Chaos Emeralds and the births of the main characters - just like any young fan comic's creators might.

We had been missing something which had been staring us in the face the whole time. The way to make our comic original, and more fun to write and draw and possibly read than any other, was not to be as original as we could, but to write it about the *real* Sonic. This 'Sonic Ideal' we dreamed of wasn't to be found among a crowd of fan characters and made up worlds, it was the Sonic world we already knew about, the one whose star jumped and ran and span in the Sonic Team's games. The Sonic Ideal would be the comic we had all been waiting for - the comic that followed the story of the games as closely as is possible.

To that end, we took the project off the Internet for the space of one year, which we used to research the subject. Researching Sonic the Hedgehog is fun. It means a lot of games playing, and a lot of buying new consoles. Over the course of the research period we got ourselves Sega Saturns and a copy of Sonic Jam, played through our Megadrive copies of the older games, paying attention to the finest details of the art style and story, looked through strings of websites for articles, music, letters, artwork

and anything else we could find on the subject which might inspire us, and frequented the *Green Hill Zone*, a sort of online mecca for Sonic Team fans.

At the same time, we were devising the story of The Neo Emeralds, which was to be our first series. Rumours of a new Sega games console and a 3D Sonic game were beginning to surface, including a shot of an enormous dragon creature made from water. We saw that as our J'Tunn, and realised that we could still tie in the *Mobius* series to this. We began to work on the overall plot of the series, which was based on Doctor Eggman's master plan to get the Neo Death Egg, his new warship, to launch. We worked very hard on this plot, because as well as writing little amusing stories, we wanted something that would keep readers on the edge of their seats, some gigantic mystery which Sonic would gradually have to solve as the story went on.

One night, we cracked it. On the phone we were discussing ideas based on the new information we had heard about the new *Sonic Adventure* title. Suddenly, we had an idea which totally changed the story's direction, and it was exactly what we were looking for. It was emotional, it was exciting, it would make readers scream to know what happens next, but at the same time it tied-in with *Sonic Adventure* wonderfully. From it, the entire twenty-issue story of *The Neo Emeralds*, which had begun simply as an idea to have Sonic and Tails search for the Chaos Emeralds through various different Zones, was born.

Scripting began shortly afterwards. Soon more than fifteen of the twenty issues had been fully scripted, and the rest planned out page by page. After all this was done, I wrote a script for a pilot issue which we decided to release on the web on the UK launch date of the Sega Dreamcast system and the *Sonic Adventure* game, to see what kind of reaction the series was likely to get.

We teamed up with a young web designer named Ben Encarnacion, who was immediately enthusiastic about the project. He produced a brilliant series of prototype websites for The Sonic Ideal, culminating in a fully Flash-enhanced version, making us one of the first groups whose website had an intro animation, something which is now quite common.

We did manage to release the comic on the intended date, and the reception was overwhelming. For months afterwards we received e-mail praising the comic, and it was even given praise by a member of the *Sonic the Hedgehog* staff from Archie comics in an online interview. As soon as the first issue was released, the message board was swamped with readers congratulating us on our efforts, and a little community was quickly built up.

Pleased with the success of the project so far, we took it away again. Initially we had intended to continue the comic as we went along, but following a bit of trouble securing artists for the second issue, we felt it would make more sense to go through a second research period, during which we could find out where our faults were with the series as it was currently planned.

This time the project disappeared from screens for a further two years. During that time we both had A-Level courses to complete, following which I went to start a Writing degree and Abby entered an Art foundation course, and there was very little chance of our being able to maintain a regular comic during that time. What we *were* able to do, though, was yet more research, as there was still a lot to do. The new game offered deeper understanding of characters like Knuckles, and gave us brand-new information on the Chaos Emeralds. By this time we had decided to not try and explain anything the Sonic Team had left a mystery, so it was great to find out official information about the Master Emerald and its relationship with Chaos and the Chao. Armed with this new information, and pre-release information about *Sonic Adventure 2*, we re-wrote certain portions of the comic and the *Neo Emeralds* plot to bring it closer to the games. We wrote out of the story any of our own characters who we felt were unnecessary, and changed the angle so that each issue very much centred on Sonic, Tails and Knuckles, with anyone else coming in second.

This was the time to really tweak the plot, and iron-out all the little bugs that had worried us about the comic. We enhanced the story, our understanding of the characters and their world, the symbolic references in the plot and the world it was based in, the pacing, the structure, and the little extras that would make it fun to read. We planned out future stories so that we could link *The Neo Emeralds* to them, including a full plot

synopsis for our second series, to be set after *Sonic Adventure* where *Neo Emeralds* is set shortly before.

It was during this phase that we talked about adapting the classic fan-favourite *Sonic 3 and Knuckles* game in the form of a special miniseries. We did a lot of research into that game, more than ever before, with our aim being to gain a deeper understanding of the plot than anyone else really had before. The breakthrough came when we realised that the story was not about Sonic or Tails but about Knuckles, and once that was fixed in our minds, planning the structure of each issue became as second nature, and the scripting phase was so much fun I completed it in a summer.

Soon it was time to get a second issue ready. We had already approached one artist who had pulled out at the last minute due to other commitments, and the second artist we talked to disappeared from the Internet for a while in order to move house.

It came to the point where we needed to find an artist we could definitely rely on. With Abby busy illustrating the first issue of the Sonic and Knuckles Special, she definitely couldn't draw issue two, and there wasn't much time left, so the job latched itself onto me.

Finally, the relaunch of The Sonic Ideal took place on June 23rd 2001, roughly two years after the pilot issue was first shown to the world, and exactly ten years since the day Sonic the Hedgehog was first unleashed into the world. *Sonic Adventure 2* was released on the same day, and the whole Sonic online community completely failed to get together for a party, because we were all too busy playing it.

And that's where we are now. With The Sonic Ideal back in action and the first ten years of Sonic Fandom behind us, we can all relax, and let everything flow. Stick with TSI, because we've got some really exciting things coming your way in the future, and we'll be keeping our promise to make this comic one of our finest Ideal Creations.

- Dave Bulmer
Director and Writer, The Sonic Ideal
Managing Director, Ideal Creations